

Ecocriticism and Environmental Imagination in Kindergarten Children

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Chapter 1: Reasons for Selecting Environmental Imagination and Ecocriticism as My MRP Topic

I work in kindergarten as an Early Childhood Educator and every year I observe the children in my class—who are between 3 and 6 years of age—displaying great care, curiosity, empathy, and love for their environment as they go about their day; they care about the living (plants, animals) and nonliving (the rocks or sky) things around them. They get frightened by the thunder in the sky and ask simple questions about their environment and the things they need for their sustenance. Their empathy about living and nonliving things makes me smile. I see children in my care wonder about their environment all the time. Children in my class are also interested in nature because the school is located near a forest. It has a huge pond and marsh full of ducks, blue herons, blue jays, eagles, dragonflies, fish, and many other sorts of wildlife.

In the following paragraphs I write about my research project in a narrative or story-telling style instead of adopting an empirical approach that reports on research only (J. Rowsell, personal communication, September 22, 2016) because it seemed to me that if I wrote my research project in a narrative style, I could delve deeper without as many constraints in to my own thoughts and memories of my distant past and also could describe my day-to-day experiences more eloquently.

Every now and then I hear the children wonder about elements of their environment that we adults take for granted. For instance, one day a little girl asked me while pressing the button to activate the water fountain: “Where does this water come from?” I smiled; many things came to my mind but I said, “Lake Ontario, it comes all the way from Lake Ontario.” Her eyes widened with wonder. She repeated: “The water comes from the lake!” I said, “Yes.” Before I could elaborate, she walked away and told another child excitedly, “this water comes from Lake

Ontario.” I saw how eagerly they shared newly acquired knowledge. Aidan Chambers (1996) writes in his book *Tell Me* that teachers sometimes do not notice children’s conversation or miss out on their thought-provoking ideas because teachers are responsible for large groups of children. I also find important conversations happen during everyday routines or when we are walking or sitting in a small group. However, sometimes large-group conversations are good too because then children learn from the ideas or thoughts of other children or discuss their mutual observation. Chambers also states that young children can and do think critically. Many children in my class also wonder out loud about things that do not seem right to them in a story book; for example, while reading *Olivia Helps Mother Nature*, one child said, “if they keep the fireflies in a jar they can die because there is no air.” In *Tell Me*, Chambers writes that children make connections of the story to their real life. Children in my class made the connection while listening to the story between the closed jar and fireflies’ need for air. Many times when I am reading to children, the story also reminds them of their family or other things in their life and “they make real world connections, on world-to-text and text-to-world links” (L. Paul, personal communication, August 25, 2016). We often underestimate children’s critical thinking, especially children who are as young as kindergartners (Chambers, 1996).

Kindergarten children’s empathy and curiosity about their environment is natural yet very interesting for me. The children in my school are lucky because the nearby forest provides them with many opportunities to see nature and learn about it. I know as an educator that “Outdoor play is vital for young children’s development” (as cited in Mayfield, Chin-Hsiu, Harwood, Rennie, & Tannock, 2009, p. 4). An outdoor environment not only is calming for the children but also provides them opportunities to learn about many things that we try to teach them inside the classroom—such as science, math, or language—in a better way, while also giving them

opportunities for physical exercise and to use their observation skills and imagination. I observed this not only as an educator but also as a mother of two children. I observed both my children enjoy themselves the most in nature, blowing on the dandelions (to my husband's consternation because he wanted the dandelions eliminated) and worrying about the well-being of insects, plants, and other living things. Children naturally behave in ways championed by Rachel Carson.

In *Silent Spring*, Carson (1962) writes that

the health of soil has been neglected all over the world. Chemical control of insects or weeds seems to have proceeded on the assumption that the soil could and would sustain any amount of insult via the introduction of poisons without striking back. The very nature of the world of soil has been largely ignored. (p. 60)

Many times when I go for a walk with children on a sidewalk in the neighbourhood, children see the pesticide notices or signs on people's lawns and ask, "Ms. Sajid, what does it say? Can you read?" I have to tell them that a pesticide or herbicide has been sprayed on the lawn here and they should stay away from it. Sometimes children ask, "why did [the homeowner] spray?" I have to tell them that "the homeowner wants to control the dandelions or bugs." Most of the children look surprised or sad; some say, "dandelions are pretty, I like them" or "they are hurting the nature." Carson also disliked the use of herbicides and warned about their harmful effects (Carson, 1962 p. 35). I guess children have an innate wisdom that we adults have lost.

Environmental imagination and ecocriticism are not new ideas. The inspiration for my project evolved in the context of my day-to-day interactions with the children in my class and my desire to understand the nature and form of the questions they so casually asked. I understood that there were pedagogical implications but I did not have an analytical sense of how they worked. During the fall season, for instance, I observed children in my class being worried about

the ladybugs and their homes. One child decided to hurt a ladybug and a few other children got very upset. One child cried and said, “the ladybug needed to go home to her children.” I was awed by their innate kindness, sensitivity, and the fact that they had brought their knowledge of the nursery verse, “ladybug, ladybug, fly away home, your house is on fire, and your children all gone” to their experience of the encounter with the real ladybug. They were also very excited when our pumpkin seeds from the pumpkin that we carved on Halloween grew but they were sad when the plants were dying due to fungus. One of the children said, “Ms. Sajid our pumpkin plants are dying.” I said, “yes, because they need more sun and light.” By chance, a few days later when I read “The Garden” in Arnold Lobel’s (1972) *Frog and Toad Together*, one of the children said, “Toad needs to be patient.” Furthermore, during one of our walks I heard a child say about a leafless tree in autumn, “the tree looks naked,” and another child in my class is always making alphabet letters out of the twigs in the ground. I realized more during my interactions with kindergartners that children are natural ecocritics.

These are a few of the examples that working with the children in my class made me think about the topic of ecocriticism and environmental imagination. As Margaret Meek (1988) says, “Reading does not happen in a vacuum. The social conditions and surroundings are important too” (p. 6). I think this is true especially when someone reads to children. Whether it is at school or at home or somewhere else, listening to a read-aloud is social. Like Aidan Chambers, Meek also emphasizes the importance of recognizing that children make “world to text” connections (p. 10). Children as readers understand a text by relating it to their own life and experiences. As a result of my interactions with children, I decided to explore the topic by reading storybooks to them and I also tried to figure out the relationships between what we were reading in class and the theoretical material related to how children respond to their environment.

Methodology

The first step for me was to look for suitable books for kindergarten children pertaining to ecocriticism and environmental imagination. My faculty supervisor Dr. Lissa Paul guided me and helped me in this process. I wanted books that were interesting, informative, and not too long because I wanted the process of listening to the story to be fun and not tedious or boring for the children. The only long book included in my research was *Iron Giant*. I also selected some other long books for my project (e.g., *The Iron Woman*; *Wild at Heart: Animal Stories*; *Wild Animals I Have Known*; and *Tarka the Otter*) but I dropped the idea of reading them because I observed that children in my class enjoyed short stories more, and also it was already May and summer vacations were approaching. I wanted to undertake the research project in my classroom because children in my class were interested in environmental imagination and I also wanted to gather more observations or hear more of children's conversation in a gentle, noninvasive way. From a practical standpoint, I also wanted to conduct this research project in my classroom because it was convenient for me to work and study at the same time. After ethics approval of my project by Brock University, I sent permission letters home (File no. 15-245 – PAUL). When I sent the permission letters to the children's homes, the parents were very excited and to my surprise every parent allowed their children to participate in this research project. I was delighted, because I realized that in working with the children on their interactions with nature, I was also part of a continuum as I remembered myself as a child waking up to the possibilities of the natural world. Dr. Jennifer Rowsell along with Dr. Lissa Paul suggested my research project could be an autoethnography, which gave me an opportunity to look at my own past.

Reflexivity and the Story Behind My MRP

My work with children and my observations reminded me of my own childhood memories as well as my love for environment and beauty in nature. I unconsciously began to analyze the insights of the children I teach in the context of my own experience as a child. As a child, I was also very interested in nature but as I grew up I forgot about it. In introducing my project about environmental imagination and ecocriticism, I think it is important that I describe a little bit about my childhood as well.

I have been living in Canada for the past 17 years but I was born and raised in the city of Lahore in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. I lived in an urban area but it was more like a suburban area or village. There were always horses, cows, water buffaloes, chickens, ducks, donkeys, sheep, or goats living in the surrounding neighbours' properties. I used to watch as men and women made cow or water buffalo dung cakes to use as fuel. I always admired their fine workmanship. My father would sometimes point out "look how straight the lines of cow-dung patties are" and I always wondered how good their aim was in placing all the patties up on the wall by a single throw. At the same time, I was fascinated by and scared of huge animals such as a buffalo or a horse.

My father could not afford to move to a different area, even though he had a PhD in geology. My mother, a certified teacher who had also worked as a headmistress, never liked the area we lived in because she belonged to a very rich family and she had lived briefly in Oslo, Norway with my father and my elder sister. My elder brother was born in Oslo. After her life in Norway, the area where we lived in Lahore seemed unbearable to her but she had no choice except to get depressed. She always called our neighbourhood a "slum" but since I had seen nothing else, I liked my home. I still do. I used to listen in wonder and awe as my mother talked

about problems caused by animals living in the urban area. I remember for a few years, my father also bought some hens so we could have fresh eggs. My mother was not happy about it. Ironically, my siblings and I all stopped eating eggs because we could see what the chickens were eating. As a 7-year-old child, I was responsible for the well-being of 15 hens, five ducks, four guinea hens, and two pigeons. I used to wash the concrete floor under their cage, feed them their food, and send them back to their cage in the evening to protect them from the stray cats. Once we were late in coming home at night after a wedding and I remember all the chickens, ducks, and guinea hens had climbed up in the grapefruit tree. In the morning we found one of the chickens missing but we found her body later on, hidden in the plants. It made us all very sad but we promised to take better care of all the hens and ducks. My fondness or awareness about plants and the environment started because of my parents. My father was a big fan of plants. Even though our house had no place to grow any vegetation, my father made flower beds on top of concrete and grew trees of pomegranate, lemon, guava, oranges, grapefruit, meethay (a kind of lemon) and plants and vines of rose, motia (a kind of jasmine), bougainvillea, tacoma, hibiscus, and many other plants. He also made sure that we knew the proper names of the plants. There were always flocks of sparrows, doves, hummingbirds, and cardinals as well as many squirrels in the trees. We could hear the birds singing early in the morning and again in the evening year round. At night, I could sometimes see fireflies in the plants too, which seemed unique since we were living in a densely populated urban area.

Even though there were not many trees in my area to begin with, the urban sprawl eliminated even more trees. As a child I saw big houses being demolished and trees being cut to make several smaller housing units to accommodate the rapidly growing population in the area. There was a very big tree in our neighbour's yard. Its trunk was at least 6 feet wide and it was

very tall as well. Every evening, hundreds of sparrows would come back to the tree to sleep. The tree was so dense that when it rained, the ground underneath it remained dry. All day long children played in its shade or old people just lay underneath the tree on a charpaie (a wooden portable bed) to save themselves from the blistering sun or men and women did their daily chores. It was like a giant umbrella made by nature. Our neighbour's house was eventually divided in four, one for each son in the family, and they all sold their share; as a result, the tree had to be cut. I still remember that I wanted to stop the neighbours from cutting the tree but I knew I could not. I also remember distinctly that I could no longer hear the loud chirping of sparrows in the morning and the evening. It became very quiet, which I did not like. As the time went by, along with clean water sewerage also became a problem. Sewer water was overflowing most of the time in our street or sometimes it would rise up into our courtyard as well.

Most houses in Pakistan have flat roofs because the weather is so hot. As a child, whenever I went on the rooftop of my home or my maternal grandmother's home—which was one of the highest houses in the area—I could see far away and I could see very few trees left in the area. To me, my house looked like an oasis in the middle of a concrete jungle. As I grew up, my parents arranged my marriage and I got married at age 21. Soon after in May 1999, I immigrated to Canada. The first things I noticed were the tulips, flowers, green grass, immensely quiet surroundings, and trees growing everywhere. At first these quiet surroundings and clean air almost gave me a panic attack. Being newlywed, having an arranged marriage along with being in a new country with an unfamiliar environment was a little too much for my heart. I missed the overly crowded roads with pedestrians, loud music, cattle, loud honking of car horns, whirring sounds of rickshaws, scooters, motorcycles, and smog-filled air full of gasoline fumes, manure

odour, and dust. I suddenly felt homesick but then I realized what clean air and quiet surroundings feels like!

Over the years, I have seen lots of grassy fields turn into strip malls and apartment buildings in Toronto, Scarborough, Mississauga, and surrounding areas. My experience of living in two very different parts of the world made me realize the importance of environment and its implication for future generations. As Rachel Carson (1962) explains in *Silent Spring*, pollution affects us from conception to death (p. 14). I often wonder what the world will be like as my biological children and the children in my class grow up. I have seen the environment being destroyed not only in Pakistan but also in many other parts of the world, including Canada. Although Canada has much better policies to take care of the environment as compared to many developing countries, there is still room for improvement. During this research project I read Ted Hughes's *Iron Giant* to the children but as a next step in the future I want to read *Iron Woman* to the children to create more awareness about environmental destruction in the world.

As a young girl I used to feel sad and desperate after seeing many trees being cut, especially along the road from the city of Lahore to the city of Kasur where my father often went to see my paternal grandmother. As 6 or 7 years of age, I remember there were certain parts of the road where trees from both sides would touch each other and I waited for that part of the road and savoured the few moments of shade and sun beaming through the thick leaves. When the trees got cut, it all became a large barren plain and I did not like the countless half-buried plastic bags in the ground littering the environment, so I wrote about it in a letter to the editor. To my surprise, it even got published.

If I look back at my memories, I remember worrying about living and nonliving things as a child but my memories have become foggy and forgotten; however, when I work with children

in my classroom now, I am reminded of my own childhood. To my surprise, once I started thinking about the connections between the children I teach and the child I was, I realized there are many similarities between my experiences and their experiences. I shall describe an incident from my childhood that made me realize the similarities even more.

This incident happened when I was little but I do not know how old I was because unfortunately my mother also passed away last year so there is no one to add to my memories. All I remember is I did not go to school yet. I started grade 1 at age 4 so I was probably younger than 4 but I remember my father was not at home and it was late at night and we were sleeping in our courtyard because it was too hot inside the house. My mother made beds for us in the courtyard where it was cooler. I got thirsty in the middle of the night and woke her up. She got up in the dark, turned on some lights in the verandah and went to the kitchen to get some water for me. As she came with a glass of water in her hand and opened the heavy wooden door, she accidentally hit something that was hopping on the ground. She freaked out, I freaked out. She quickly turned on the light bulb of the courtyard to see what hopped and limped on the ground. We could see some blood on the concrete floor. Then we saw a medium-sized frog limping and hopping on the floor. The light bulb frightened the frog even more. The more we tried to catch it so we could help it, the more it hopped. It ran towards the garage and went in to the open sewer system (called “mori”) that we had in our house and that were all over the city. I remember crouching down on the floor and looking at the injured frog in the middle of the night, going in to the dark arch of the open mori. I started to cry; I still remember saying to my mother “how will the frog go back to his children?” My mother tried to console me and said she could not do anything since the frog had gone into the mori. She was sad and I was sad too. We talked about the incident in the morning as well and we all decided no matter how hot the weather got, we

would not sleep in the courtyard. For many years we could not sleep in our courtyard due to that incident. I had forgotten all about this frog incident but some of the children in my class picked up a ladybug at our school and they wanted to take it back to the classroom, but one little girl burst into tears and said, “this ladybug is somebody’s mommy too and she needs to go home.” We had a jar ready to take the ladybug to our classroom and even I was ready at that time to take the ladybug to the classroom for the children to see but we put the ladybug back on the tree, respecting the wishes of one child. In retrospect I felt the little girl was right and we were being cruel. She was empathetic towards the ladybug and we know that empathy is essential for environmental imagination and ecocriticism. Eisenberg and Strayer (1987) state that “young children confuse their own and other’s feelings and act as if they themselves are experiencing another’s distress, is an early stage in the development of empathy” (p. 7).

In the light of my own experiences and my daily interactions with children, I wrote my autoethnography in a reflexive way. Reflexivity is essential in autoethnographic work as it adds authority and legitimacy to a person’s story. Clifford Geertz is a prominent contributor to autoethnographical theory (J. Rowsell, personal communication, September 22, 2016). Geertz “emphasized the analytical necessity of separating cultural and social aspects of human life, which were to be seen as independently variable but mutually interdependent” (Cannon, 2016, para. 3). We are all humans and while writing my research project I wrote about my personal experiences because although my experiences are unique, we all feel the same emotions and our lives are in one way or another interdependent and connected with others, hence reflexivity in my autoethnography seemed essential. In the following chapter, I briefly describe the theoretical background of ecocriticism and environmental imagination.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background About Environmental Imagination

Over the years I have been reading different books to the children in my care. I love reading and my love for reading has become contagious for the children as well. I also realize that children in my care love to take care of the environment. They worry about the seeds they grow and wonder why their plant did not grow. To assure them that their slow-growing plant will indeed grow, I have to give explanations like “your seeds are sleeping; they will grow soon.” Children love the plants they grow and if they lose their plant while taking it home or due to disease, they are sincerely distraught. Based on the children’s interests, I wanted to read children’s books about the environment for my major research paper. I wanted to find books that were about the environment. As Buell (1995) writes, “one of the projects of environmental text is to render the object-world and that this project is sometimes best achieved through what would seem to be outright fiction or distortion” (p. 103). I selected books that were based on environment. I chose books about animals, plants, and insects. But before I read to the children, I wanted to educate myself more about environmental imagination and ecocriticism. In the following section, I discuss a few of the books and articles I read in order to demonstrate my understanding about environmental imagination, ecocriticism, reading to the children, and book talks.

***Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson**

Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, although somewhat dated now, has important information that really moved me. *Silent Spring* brought attention and awareness of the environmental crisis to the world (L. Paul, personal communication, September 13, 2016). Carson (1962) describes environmental issues and problems caused by pesticide use, especially DDT (p. 23). It was a little surprising for me to find out that DDT was banned in the United States a long time ago but still was used abundantly during the 1980s and 1990s in my home and community in Pakistan. I did not know that it was banned until I came to Canada and took different courses. We do not

realize that “Global contamination has become a fact of modern life” (Carson, 1962, p. 16). We do not make the connection that harmful chemicals do not remain in one place. Their harmful effects travel along or hitchhike with different plants, birds, animals, insects, crops, or any living organisms. While reading *Silent Spring*, I realized even more that it is very important for our children to learn to take care of their environment.

A few years ago, I completed a Food Safety and Security course at Ryerson University and I learned about the Dole Food Company’s use of pesticide on bananas in Chili and Nicaragua and many other countries. Whatever I have learned over the years, my (biological) children have been learning it too. My daughter was 9 years old at that time and when she found out about it, she was really sad. She made sure that we did not buy any bananas or anything produced by Dole. Our younger generation needs to know early on that nature has created a balance and, as Rachel Carson says, we need to respect that balance instead of destroying the ecosystem. Reckless use of pesticide also kills helpful bugs and insects, such as bees (Carson, 1962, p. 33). I have also come to think that our younger generation does understand the need to care for the ecosystem, but maybe the older generation still does not understand it. I say that because children in my care often look at bugs and tell each other, “these bugs help the nature, do not kill them.” I also look at bugs differently than children. When my son was just a year old, he was playing with a toy and I was reading a book. He picked up an inch-long black bug and placed it on my knee. I screamed and almost jumped off the couch. The book fell on the ground, the bug hopped off, and my son looked at me with surprised big eyes. I said to my son, “bugs are for looking only, not for touching.” Then I wondered where the bug came from inside my apartment; maybe from the thick forest at the back of our building. I admired my son’s fearlessness because I was very scared of bugs. My paranoia with bugs increased when I lived in

a cockroach- and centipede-ridden basement apartment when I moved to Canada as a new immigrant. By the time my children were born, we had moved to a better and bug-free place.

I love trees and plants as I always have but not so much in August, September, and October when my allergies are completely out of control. In September a new school year begins and so do my allergies. Now after working with children and with my newly gained knowledge about bugs, insects, and trees, as an adult I now also look at nature differently. But still my love for nature is less as compared to that felt by young children or when I was a child myself. I see empathy and care for nature and other living things in young children. Maybe the day-to-day living of the world makes us hardened and calloused as we age. I often get a lecture about genetically modified foods from my 13-year-old daughter, who worriedly asks, “what will be the result of these genetically modified foods or GMO on our health?” Unfortunately the environmental destruction is caused not by children but by adults. It is the adults in society, such as government organizations, who allow many things that are not good for the environment, both in the past and even today. But working with young children has made me appreciate nature once more and realize the importance of bugs and insects. As children in my class say to each other, “bugs help nature.”

I saw a lot of pesticide use in Pakistan. Being an agricultural country, there were lots of advertisements for pesticides on Pakistani television. I remember advertisements in Punjabi of pesticides named “Ripcord” and “Padan” by Bayer that were regularly broadcasted. Many pesticides are used to increase crop yields, but sadly, as Rachel Carson (1962) also states in her book, they affect animals, humans, and the environment alike (p. 27). Carson used the critical language to help us understand the problem presented by pesticides that are represented by pharmaceutical companies as the solution (L. Paul, personal communication, September 13th,

2016). Furthermore, Carson is correct when she says that these pesticides penetrate into the earth as well. I sometimes think many of the pesticides or chemicals deemed safe today may be considered harmful in the future. With large agribusiness products and food being imported into Canada from all over the world, I think the pesticides are being moved around all over the world. Carson believed that humans are destroying nature, and her work has been cited by many authors. “Buell alludes to Rachel Carson’s explicit charge that harm to nature is caused literally by man, that is, it is manmade” (Paul, 2016, p. 23). Lawrence Buell (1995) also notes that “Carson takes humankind to be just another predator” (p. 205). Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* is also considered very important in the field of ecocriticism and environmental imagination. In the following section, I discuss a few points from *Environmental Imagination*.

The Environmental Imagination by Lawrence Buell

Lawrence Buell’s (1995) *Environmental Imagination* was a very enlightening read. While reading this book, “green reading and green thinking” seemed very important to me (Buell, 1995, p. 1). Buell’s work was influenced by Henry Thoreau’s *Walden Pond*. Buell stated that “environmental questions, whether in literature or daily life can be discussed in abstraction from other issues” (p. 14). Buell analyzes the work of many different authors in *Environmental Imagination*—including William Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Dickenson, John Milton, John Keats, Edger Allen Poe, Tennyson, Emmerson, Rudyard Kipling, and Seton—and how such authors have used nature in their work to make us aware of environmental issues and provide a map of what the environmental problems are (L. Paul, personal communication, August 25, 2016). Furthermore, Buell also writes:

As revisionary scholarship on race and gender has shown, nature has historically been not only directly exploited but also the sign under which women and nonwhites have been

grouped in the process of themselves being exploited even while being relished as exotic, spontaneous, and so forth. (p. 21)

These lines by Buell resonated with me because despite being sometimes admired for their looks, a majority of women of colour are at the bottom of the social hierarchy all over the world. If we look at the nature using the metaphor of a woman who has been raped or oppressed or if we look at nature as any community that has been enslaved, maybe we can understand the similarities of trauma and atrocities that human beings have perpetuated against nature.

Humans admire nature but they have raped and violated it instead of nurturing or protecting it. If we look at the history or even in our current society, people of colour and women have been second-grade citizens all over the world, much like nature has been enslaved and overpowered as well. Buell (1995) mentions that historically nature has been used “as a symbolic reinforcement of the subservience of disempowered groups: nonwhites, women and children” (p. 21). The idea that a poem or text about nature could be about marginalized groups was new for me, but it resonated with me because nature has been violated just like many disempowered groups. I also thought that reading texts about environmental imagination such as *Iron Giant*, which is a story about a boy who makes a difference, can both educate and empower children.

Buell (1995) referred to “The green script or pastoral ideology” (p. 33) that can create awareness in people and in children also, but it depends upon how authors have addressed the issue of nature in their writing. Buell also stated that American literature is filled with writings about nature and wilderness. Many of the authors worked hard and researched when they wrote their books. “Henry Williamson claimed that he rewrote *Tarka the Otter* (1927) seventeen times in order to get the facts right” (Buell, 1995, p. 196). Initially I was going to read *Tarka the Otter* to children but it seemed too long. Especially after reading *Iron Giant*, I realized children in my

class enjoy shorter books, especially in the afternoon when I read books to the children. Buell brought up another important point that struck me: women who become “hermitess” seek refuge in nature but I think children know it early on that nature makes them happy; as Buell notes, “nature is where you go if you have no place to go” (p. 46). Sometimes I see children who are crying or are sad or have some kind of special need or are just having a bad day cheer up when they are outside. They are carefree and they enjoy themselves more when they are surrounded by the softness of the grass, trees, flowers, and leaves.

Several things resonated with me while reading *The Environmental Imagination*. Buell (1995) referred to Thoreau’s sadness and concern about “deforestation to make the roads and for fuel” (p. 120). I have seen this happen not only here in Canada but also in Pakistan. Even this year a large grassy field on my street has been turned into a big elegant building. I moved to this area in Mississauga 13 years ago and many huge empty fields near my home have been turned into strip malls. Even though I live in Mississauga, a few years ago I could see houses in Oakville from my window but now I cannot do so.

Thoreau also believed farming as a “soul withering false economy of work” (as cited in Buell, 1995, p. 128). Modern ways of farming and agribusiness do seem objectionable to me as well. Our knowledge is greater than Thoreau’s about pollution and the atrocities man has done to the environment but we use very little of that knowledge to help our environment (Buell, 1995, p. 139). Along with *Environmental Imagination*, I also read Aidan Chambers’s (1996) *Tell Me* to better facilitate book talk with children.

***Tell Me* by Aidan Chambers**

Aidan Chambers’s (1996) *Tell Me: Children, Reading, and Talk* is a good resource for all the teachers and book lovers who want to have a conversation with children about the books they

read. Kindergarten children love to talk and reading with them gives a good opportunity to express themselves. Reading with children is “Helping children engage in drama of reading” (Chambers, 1996, p. 5), or children becoming an artist, critic, audience, or actor. Chambers writes that “Exclusively repetitious reading of any one kind of book, of any writer, is flat earth reading” (p. 5). After reading these lines I made a conscious effort to include books by a variety of authors. Especially for my research project with children, I wanted a variety of books to make things interesting for them. We have to remember that “Booktalk isn’t about one person communicating something straightforwardly to another. It is a more complicated and more communal activity than that” (Chambers, 1996, p. 13). It can be a more complicated activity, especially if the group of children is very large with children with different needs and behaviours, or it can be fairly simple as well if everyone is respectful and listening to what a child or adult is saying. It is very important that children and adults not only talk but also listen and hear others. When we listen to children we realize how their thought process works or what they understood after listening to the story in class, or after having a conversation with their peers and teachers.

Chambers (1996) also cited Dr. Lissa Paul’s report of undergraduate students getting “intellectual pleasure” from turning back to the text again and again in order to understand it. I experienced the same thing that children enjoyed reading the same books over and over again with me, although they would tell me that they have read that certain book already but some books are so dear to them that they want to hear them again, such as *Lama Lama Red Pajamas* (Chambers, 1996, pp. 13-17). Chambers also makes a very valid point that any opinion children express is worth respecting and they should not be called “silly” or “childish.” Whether the children express that they like a book or not, their opinion should be noted and respected by the

teacher and their peers (Chambers, 1996, p. 38). Children while listening to a story imagine or recreate the story according to their own experience and understanding. I think the process described by Wolfgang Iser is true for kindergarten children as well: “We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectation, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation” (as cited in Chambers, 1996, p. 39). These lines are full of wisdom and they can be true not only for many other situations in life but also for reading books to children or reading to self.

While choosing books for my research project, Chambers’s advice about choosing texts was very helpful for me because whatever text we read, it has some effect on us. It may not change us but it certainly makes some impression on us. Chambers gives example that reading books about certain ideology or religion does not necessarily convert us but certainly may change our perspective. Therefore, the choice of books by teachers for the children is very important. I wanted to choose books about environmental imagination and ecocriticism in the hope that children will learn something about their environment and take care of it. Furthermore, like Chambers, I also think that honouring children’s abilities and being honest is very important (Chambers, 1996, p. 54).

How Texts Teach What Readers Learn by Margaret Meek

My learning was further enhanced by Margaret Meek’s (1988) *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*. “Using Bruner’s metaphor again we can see that the artist or the story teller ‘recruits’ children’s imagination by presenting them with familiar in a new guise, or by making a ‘logical’ extension of the real” (Meek, 1988, p. 14). Many of children’s storybooks are based on fantasy whereby robots, animals, or trees talk. Children enjoy this mixture of fantasy and reality. Writers know this also so they write stories that involve part reality and part fantasy to keep their

stories interesting for young children. Pictures in text are considered helpful for the young children. Young children gradually read storybooks with pictures and then read books without pictures but then children get better at reading as they grow up, and start to read comics that are full of illustrations (Meek, 1988, pp. 25-27). Meek's point is very valid because kindergarten children in my class look at pictures while I read a book and they point out things in the illustrations. That is why I always read the name of the author and illustrator before reading a book. I also experienced this with my son and my daughter who read picture books in kindergarten, and then as they grew older they read books with only text and now as teenagers they read comics along with other novels or books. I also read *Harry Potter* and *The Little Princess* to both my children but when they saw the movies of these novels, they said, "we liked the book better than the movie because it was better in our imagination." Hence we can say that storybooks with or without illustrations give wings to children's imagination.

Literature Review

While reading the "Environmental Imagination" issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* (Wynne-Jones, 2011), I was reminded of children in my class. "Ecocriticism," as Munroe (2015) says, "considers the relationship between humans and nonhumans" (p. 461) and I see children exploring those relationships every day. I especially noticed this while reading *Iron Giant* to the children. Children loved *Iron Giant* as if the titular character was real and they showed sympathy and worry when he got hurt by the space-bat-angel-dragon in the story or fell down in the ditch. They knew he was not human but an alien and they also knew that the Iron Giant was working for the humans by saving the earth. The following queries by Karin Westman, Naomi Wood, and David Russell (2011) made me smile: "What makes the imagination in children's books 'environmental'? What do climatologists and botanists, children's writers and artists, and the

playing child have in common?” (p. v). Along with many other articles, I also read articles from the Project Muse journal series, including “Speaking for the Trees” by Natalie op de Beeck (2005). I liked the author’s view about the children’s book industry and how children’s storybooks can create more awareness about environment. Furthermore, I also read *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* (Paul, 2016) which inspired me more to read *Iron Giant* to children. Through these books and journal articles, I learned the theoretical perspective about reading to children, having a discussion with them, and also about the topic of my MRP—environmental imagination and ecocriticism. I had the practical knowledge but these books were filled with knowledge about environmental imagination, ecocriticism, and tips and ideas about reading to children that really resonated with me.

Chapter 3: Reading and Selection of Children's Books for My MRP

Before starting my research project, I was more of a “flat-earth reader” (Chambers, 1996, p. 5) because I read mostly books that were by Robert Munch, funny books or rhyming books, or books that my students picked (which were by Robert Munch half of the time). I noticed children also exhibited what Aidan Chambers (1996) referred to as the “three sharings”: “sharing enthusiasms,” by saying “I love this story book, can you read it again”; “sharing of puzzles” or questions about things they want me to explain or share their questions with other children; and “sharing of connections” because they find rhymes, patterns, or repeated phrases that come again and again in a story (Chambers, 1996, pp. 8-12). After reading *Tell Me*, I learned how to read critically with children. During my every day reading of the books to children I always enjoy when children answer my simple, unstructured questions after reading a book and I am always surprised and delighted by their responses and intelligence and my students also love it when I read books to them. Based on my observations, I decided to read storybooks to the children for my MRP and also to ask them simple questions about each book. My faculty supervisor Dr. Lissa Paul and my colleagues supported me a lot during the process of reading storybooks for my MRP, and I am sincerely thankful for that.

Along with a full-time job, being a mother, part-time student, wife, daughter, and sister was not easy but I wanted to explore as many books as I could for my MRP with the children in my class. Dr. Paul also suggested some titles and I knew children in my class enjoyed listening to the stories about animals or children's books based on facts or fiction. I picked up some books from the local library and Dr. Paul also provided some very good books. I really liked the books that Dr. Paul gave me because they had more pictures, fewer words, and were about the environment (a list of the books I read during the research project is provided in the Appendix). Children also liked the books that were not text heavy, especially the children who could not

read; they could also understand the environmental changes by just looking at the rich illustrations or learn about wildlife and animals by just looking at the detailed pictures in the books (e.g., *Window* by Jeannie Baker; *All Pigs Are Beautiful* by Dick King-Smith; *Think of an Eel* by Karen Wallace; *Caterpillar, Caterpillar* by Vivian French; and *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* by Jeannie Baker). But they also liked *Iron Giant* which is comparatively a long book and perhaps the first chapter book for children in my class.

Reading to the children was a very enjoyable journey and I loved every moment of it. The first step was to send the permission letters home and to get them back signed by the parents. I had very few days because it was May already and I wanted to make the best use of my time before the start of summer vacation. After getting the permission letters back from the parents, I started my journey of reading different books to the children with *Iron Giant*. In the following section, I describe several reasons for choosing *Iron Giant* as my first book to read to the children for the MRP. I also provide a little bit of context about my fondness and delight in reading to little children and its connection to my MRP and the selection of books and topic.

Reasons for Reading *Iron Giant* as the First Book for My Research Project

I have been reading books to children for almost 16 years. One of the first things I did when my son was born was to read to him. While reading or singing to children, I realized the importance of props, especially when groups are large. For the past few years, I have had a companion of a white stuffed toy monkey with a tail, named “Mr. Monkey” as my helper while children listen to the story because it is hard to get the attention of a group of 30 children, whose ages range from only 3 to almost 6. I brought Mr. Monkey to the class one day but I did not know what to name him and I asked children in my class to suggest a name. They were very excited. Some suggested a boy name and some children suggested a girl name; after a lot of

discussion, the children decided the stuffed toy should be called Mr. Monkey and it has been his name ever since. Mr. Monkey has been a beloved friend who only comes out to meet the children when they are listening to the story with me. My teaching partner was very impressed by Mr. Monkey and suggested we create a class toy that children can take home and write or draw about, hence another stuffed toy “Super Cow” came in to existence. I stitched a red cape for a stuffed toy cow, and the children loved our new Super Cow. My partner told the children that Super Cow had come from space in a space rocket that got destroyed and now Super Cow was stuck on earth. Long story short, along with many activities we also made a space ship for Super Cow to fly back home.

During these several months’ long activities with Super Cow, the children became interested in space. We watched some NASA videos and looked at books about space because children had a lot of interest in other planets and stars. One day while talking, my teaching partner suggested that maybe I should read a chapter book as well to the children because it would be a new experience for them to listen to a longer story. I also wanted to “recruit” (per Bruner’s metaphor) children’s imagination by reading a long story (Meek, 1988, p. 14). One thing led to another and when I read *Iron Giant* by Ted Hughes, I showed it to my teaching partner. Not knowing if she would like *Iron Giant* or not was a little nerve-racking, but she liked the idea. Based on the children’s interest in space and our class mascot Super Cow, I decided to read *Iron Giant* as the first book for my MRP.

Reading of *Iron Giant*

Reading *Iron Giant* to the children was not easy. It is comparatively a long book and was the longest book the children in my class had ever read in the classroom with a teacher. Although they were excited about it because *Iron Giant* was mentioned in the permission letter, I always

felt that reading *Iron Giant* after lunch hour was not so suitable because the children got tired by 1:30 p.m. I would have preferred to read it early in the morning but it was not possible to do so because of our schedule. However children were very excited to hear the story. My teaching partner and I explained to them that *Iron Giant* has few pictures, unlike other books they had read with me. I read them a chapter each day and it was finished in 5 days. After I was done reading every day, I made some notes of children's comments after school.

It seemed to me that the children related *Iron Giant* to our class mascot Super Cow, because during the reading of chapter 1, one child asked, "Super cow is asking when will the little boy come in the story?" I could see that *Iron Man* had "recruited children's imagination" (Meek, 1988, p. 14). They listened patiently to the story but their imagination took a little while to give them a clear picture of the story. Some children commented, "He is like the hulk; he is like the green giant." One of the children said, "He is like a robot." They understood that Iron Giant was a friend of the children and, as Aidan Chambers (1996) wrote, the children made text to world connections (pp. 24-37). They found the Iron Giant to be very amusing. They giggled when Iron Giant's body parts hopped, jumped and then joined together in chapter 1.

When I read chapter 2, they were more interested and they listened to the story very quietly. They were surprised that Iron Giant's eyes could change colour. One child said, "Iron Giant goes back into the sea and maybe he eats the cars there and helps clean the world." It seemed like an incredibly perceptive comment by a child and it also demonstrates that the child had already figured out that *Iron Giant* is a kind of recycling story (L. Paul, personal communication, September 13, 2016). At the end of the chapter, a few children wanted to know what would happen to Iron Giant. One children guessed, "maybe he will go back to space" while

child said, “maybe Iron Giant will live in someone’s backyard,” but I said, to them “you will have to wait till tomorrow to find out.”

As we read chapter 3, one child asked, “Why Iron Giant eats metal?” and another child answered “because it helps him get strong and he is also cleaning the earth.” When I asked “what would you do if you saw Iron Giant?” one child said, “I will kiss him and hug him.” Another said, “I will run and hide.” Another said, “I will scream.” It was exactly the range of responses being worked through by the children that fit with the discussion Aidan Chambers had described (L. Paul, personal communication, September 13, 2016). They were sad when Iron Giant fell in the hole the farmers had dug. One child said, “somebody should help Iron Giant.” All the children cheered and were very excited when Iron Giant climbed out of the hole. All the children loved to hear about the picnic in chapter 3 and their favourite part was when Iron Giant’s hand came out of the pit that the farmers had dug. They all wanted me to plan a class picnic so that we could all go for a field trip. I could see they were empathetic toward Iron Giant. Their love and sympathy for Iron Giant was evident by their comments. They talked about Iron Giant as if he was real. After listening to the children’s comments I became more aware of what Aidan Chambers and Margret Meek had written in their work about children making text-to-world and world-to-text connections (Meek, 1988, p. 10). I could also see that *Iron Giant* was a story that recruited children’s imagination by presenting them with a familiar world in a new appearance by making a “logical extension of the real” (Meek, 1988, p. 14).

By the time I read chapter 4 on my fourth day of reading *Iron Giant*, they seemed excited and eager to hear the story by sitting very quietly for me to begin the story. Some children loved saying “space-angel-bat-alien” and they kept repeating it. Some other children also kept on repeating “space-bat-angel-dragon.” One child said, “maybe that is Spiderman.” They were

happy when Iron Giant agreed to fight the space alien. By this time I noted the children got used to listening to a long storybook and they were in love with Iron Giant. They listened to the story quietly with anticipating, widened eyes. I realized it more when one of the children wanted to take *Iron Giant* to read it with his family at home and all the other children protested and complained to me that “Tom [pseudonym] is taking the *Iron Giant* home.” I said to Tom that “I still have to read one more chapter, then you can take it home.” He pouted his lips and said, “but I wanted to read *Iron Giant* with my mommy, I want to show it to her.” I was surprised but very happy and impressed as well because Tom along with many other children surprised me by being interested in reading and especially in a chapter book. Perhaps I was inspiring all the children to be “intergalactic” readers and this incident also confirmed the value of the choice of the books as well (L. Paul, personal communication, September 13, 2016).

When reading chapter 5, I noticed that the children seemed shocked or mesmerized by the story. All I heard were occasional “Ahhs” and “Oohs.” They had never heard a story like this before. They loved it when the Iron Giant defeated the space-bat-angel-dragon. It was a new idea for them to listen to a long story. Some of the children were really amused by the story whereas others were not because they missed the pictures. Some children loved the mention of the jewels that fell off the space-bat-angel-dragon. They were excited at the mere mention of the rubies, diamonds, and sapphire. One child said, “I would make a tiara out of the jewels.” There are always children in my class who absolutely adore superheroes and the name of “space-bat-angel-dragon” got their attention. They really liked the part when the Iron Giant defeated the space-bat-angel-dragon but they were worried when his ear melted a little.

Overall I found it a bit of a challenge to read *Iron Giant* to a group of 4 to 6 year olds who are at very different developmental levels and have very different interests. They did not

develop much interest in the story in the first chapter but by the second chapter they developed some interest. Paying attention to peritextual clues is important in developing children's interest in the story (L. Paul, personal communication, August 25, 2016). I say that because children listened with more interest when I told children that the story was written by a dad named Ted Hughes and it was for his two children Frieda and Nicholas. Being more visual learners, they all loved the picture when the Iron Giant's hand came out of the pit and the family's picnic fell in. Many children loved it when Iron Giant came out of the earth. It was a long reading session for the children as compared to other books that end in one sitting, but I wanted to know how the children would react to reading of *Iron Giant*. To my surprise they exhibited a sense of imagination, wonder, empathy, care, sense of right and wrong, and joy while listening to the *Iron Giant*.

I found children who have no interest in regular pictured stories were more interested in listening to the *Iron Giant* story, maybe because it engaged their imagination. In the beginning children wanted to know more about Hogarth and kept on asking me "when the little boy will come again in the story" but by the end they were so mesmerized by the Iron Giant and his battles with space-bat-angel-dragon and the jewels that fell out of his body that they did not even ask for Hogarth. I think they believed that the Iron Giant was the real hero of the book. While reading *Iron Giant* to the children I also realized "Hogarth's status as protagonist, and focus instead on the Iron Man himself: that is, to read *The Iron Man*, not as Hogarth's story but as the story of its title character" (Paul, 2016, p. 20). Children also pointed out that Iron Giant's food was old metal and one child said, "when he eats all that metal he is cleaning the world." I also realized that "*Iron Man* is another kind of recycling book" (L. Paul, personal communication, August 25, 2016). Meek wrote that *Iron Giant* can be read by children of all ages. She also mentions "Some of the youngest readers see as deeply into Hughes's stated intentions for the story as do the oldest" (Meek, 1988, p. 30). When reading *Iron Giant* to the children, I also

found that children were able to understand the story and enjoy it. Meek (1988) also states that reading stories, literature, poetry, and fiction take children to a different understanding of things, their world becomes limitless, and they gain a unique focus that they cannot achieve otherwise (pp. 39-40). I also observed this while reading *Iron Giant* to the children.

After reading *Iron Giant* I read a few *Olivia* series books about the environment, plants, and animals. The first book I read in the *Olivia* series was *Olivia Helps Mother Nature*.

Reading *Olivia Helps Mother Nature*

When I read *Olivia Helps Mother Nature*, the children did not know much about recycling but they were interested to know more about it. Before I read the book I explained to the children what products we can recycle and what products we cannot because we have a blue recycling bin in our classroom. It reduces the garbage in the world and will keep our world clean and green. I explained what goes in to the green bin, blue bin, and garbage, respectively. The children were surprised that paper, plastic, and some other products can be recycled and made into other different things. I always explain to the children while they are drawing that they should not waste paper; use one sheet of paper completely and then get another sheet of paper because paper is made out of trees. Some remember to put paper into the recycling bin while others do not. When I explained to the children about recycling, one child said, “my mom also puts newspaper in the blue bin.”

Children were very absorbed in the book and in the end Olivia captures some fireflies in a jar to keep her brother’s room illuminated at night but children in my class were worried. One child said, “the fireflies will die in the jar because there is no air.” Here again I noticed that the children made text-to-world and world-to-text connections (Chambers, 1996, pp. 24-37) while listening to this story. They showed that they have empathy and they care about other creatures and also they look at things and their environment from a different angle, not like the author who

put the fireflies in a jar. After we finished reading the book, I asked “what did you learn from the book?”; one child said, “paper should go in recycling and garbage goes in garbage. You do not throw garbage on the ground.”

Reading *The Grouchy Ladybug*

Children were drawn to this book because they love ladybugs. When I gave them hints about the next animal grouchy ladybug was going to meet, they tried to guess which animal it was and it became an interesting way to read the book. It became more of a guessing game which amused the children a lot. They had read this book before but when we read it again for this research project they listened very attentively. Children asked me, “what are aphids?” I explained that they are tiny insects or bugs that hurt the plants and ladybugs eat them and help the plants remain healthy. One child said, “The grouchy ladybug is not nice.” When I asked if they like or had a favourite part in the book, different children picked different parts in the book. One child liked the whale and said, “The whale was so big.” Another child said, “I like praying mantis because he comes in *Kung Fu Panda*. That is my favourite movie.” Another child said, “I like the gorilla because he looks strong.” All the children agreed that the ladybugs are good for the environment. One child said, “they are good for the plants.”

Reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*

Children had read this book before and they were very interested in it. They seemed to enjoy reading it again with me. This brought Aidan Chambers’s (1996) point to my mind that reading the same story again and again to children is sometimes pleasurable (pp. 13-17). When I read this book I asked them which day came after (e.g., before I flipped the page I asked, “what comes after Monday?”). The children kept on guessing and it became a game as well which kept them interested. One child said about the caterpillar, “She eats too much.” When I asked if the book reminded them of anything, one child said, “It reminds me of my daddy. He is always

hungry.” When I asked if they liked any part in the book, the children unanimously said, “when the caterpillar turns into a butterfly.” One child said, “this is a beautiful butterfly.” Many children said, “I like butterflies.” When one of the children said, “I want to catch a butterfly,” another child responded by saying, “if you touch butterflies they die.” I also said, “yes, you can look at the butterflies with your eyes but if you touch them you will hurt them.”

Overall the children loved this book and they showed great love, care, and empathy towards nature and butterflies. “[Empathy] encompasses dimension which involves the capacity to see things from the perspective of others and an affective dimension that involves sharing other people’s emotion” (Bratitsis & Ziannas, 2015, p. 232). They also learned about metamorphosis when the caterpillar turned into a butterfly. When I asked “Does anyone know what metamorphosis is?” children in my class surprised me by answering this question. One child said, “my daddy told me it is when the caterpillar turn into butterfly.”

Reading *Olivia Plants a Garden*

I showed the children this book and asked them what they can do to help the plants. They suggested before even reading the book that maybe “talking to seeds will help them grow” and one child said, “I sing to my plants.” They truly enjoyed this book because they have been planting so many seeds inside the classroom and they also planted seeds outside, in the field. Every time we went outside we watered the plants. They listened to the story very carefully. In the end some children wanted some Venus flytrap seeds after listening to the story.

Reading *Olivia and the Ducklings*

I was surprised that children listened to the storybook very quietly. The story mentions that the ducks come inside the house. When I asked the children if that was a good idea, three or four children said, that it was not good for the ducks to live inside the house, that they would be happier at the pond. One child said, “It is good for the ducks to live with their mom.” Another

child said, “I know they like mud.” Children exhibited all the signs of care and empathy for ducks and also their knowledge about ducks while listening to this storybook.

Reading *Window*

When I started reading this book, the children were very much aware about the changing environment and scenery in the book. When the world changed in the book, they were not happy about it; they did not want such a world that was polluted or overcrowded. Many of them said, “if they ever bought a home, it would be probably in a neighbourhood that is not overcrowded.” One of the children said the book reminded them of their family cottage. All the children agreed that they did not like when the community got overcrowded. They noticed each and every change in the book and they were very observant. Children were making a “connection with the tension between habitable space and destruction of the environment” (L. Paul, personal communication, August 25, 2016). Interestingly one child who has just moved from another country to Canada kept on telling me how he likes the overcrowded scenery instead of the pages where there were less overcrowded spaces and more nature and greenery. I asked him why he likes the overcrowded pictures, but he had no explanation. He just shrugged his shoulders and smiled. My assumption was maybe because it reminded him of his country of origin.

Reading *Caterpillar, Caterpillar*

This book caught the children’s interest from the very beginning. There are several peritextual elements in this book. Higonnet (1990) explained that peritext means “peripheral” features including design, illustrations, nonverbal material, or anything that adds to children’s understanding or enjoyment of the text (p. 47). The peritextual elements such as added facts about caterpillars along with the story and realistic illustrations play a big role in children’s understanding of this book (Higonnet, 1990, p. 48). Even children who are not very interested in

reading listened to the book due to all the pictures, and I think also because this book was different than the books I had read before and butterflies fascinate children. When I finished reading this book, one child said, “I am surprised how the butterflies live.” One child said, “They are fussy eaters like me. My mom says I am fussy.” I noticed that they were worried about the eggs of butterflies when it rained in the story. One child said, “I thought the eggs would fall in rain.” They were surprised that butterflies only eat nettles. One child said, “I want to grow nettles at home.” The story mentions the grandfather’s advice of not touching the butterfly and one of the children said, “When we touch the caterpillar, it makes them sad and they get hurt.” One child said, “I was sad that the butterfly was wet when it came out of the cocoon but it was fine, it can fly.” I could see they were making text-to-world connections just as Aidan Chambers and Margret Meek mentioned in their work (Meek, 1988, p. 10). They loved the butterfly book and they wanted me to read it again and again.

Reading *Think of an Eel*

When I started reading this book the children were not sure what eels were. When I asked them if anyone knew what an eel was, one child said, “I know, eels have electricity.” Many children were surprised that eels have electricity. They were surprised that eels lived in the ocean. Some children said they were scared of eels because they have sharp teeth. Once we started reading they were amazed by the facts revealed in the book. When I asked what new things they learned from the book, one child was very surprised and said, “The eel did not eat for 80 days.” Another said, “eels have electricity.” They were excited to see the transparent baby eels. When they saw baby eels, some children said, “I am not afraid of eels, I think they are pretty.” This book invoked a lot of wonder and awe in children. When I asked if the children could do anything to keep the baby eels healthy in water, one child said, “give them food” and

another said, “love them.” Children learned about eels and they seemed interested to learn about a creature that they did not know before and that lives in water.

Reading *All Pigs Are Beautiful*

Children in my class like pigs so they seemed interested when I started reading this book. When I asked what they liked best about the book, one child said, “pigs are like people and they are smarter than other animals.” One child said, “I love pigs,” and another said, “I love playing in the mud too, just like pigs.” Another child said, “I do not like to eat everything but these pigs do.” When one child said, “Pigs eat garbage,” another responded by saying, “That means they help in cleaning up.” I asked “does it mean they help in keeping the world clean?” All the children unanimously agreed. Children were surprised that pigs grunted or squealed when people talked to them. One child said, “the pig in the book has too many wives.” I found by this time children were talking about the book all by themselves. They wanted to tell their opinion as soon as we were done reading the book or most of the time in the middle of reading.

Reading *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*

Children were very interested in this book, especially when I told them that the book was a collage made by the author, just like the way they make things out of plasticine or playdough. I also told them the book was written in Australia. One child said, “the book reminded me of beach and my cottage.” One child said, “I want to go to the beach too.” Then the child said, to me, “Can we go to the beach, can you take us to the beach?” Another child said, “I like playing in the water and sand and I like this book because it has sand and water.” They loved the book; they loved looking for hidden children, people, or shadows of creatures and things in the book. It became more of a game for the children. It gave children a sense of pride when they could point

out the ghostly figures, objects, hidden stories of the landscape, and changes in the scenery in the book and any other child could not.

Concluding Comments About My Experience

Chambers (1996) wrote that reading to oneself and being read to can be different kinds of experiences. When children pick up a book and explore it all by themselves, they look at the book quietly but when I read to them they not only hear what is written but they add their comments to the reading. It becomes more of a social experience and adds to everyone's learning and knowledge. Children learn from me and from each other. I learn from them and I learn more about them. For my research, the children were very young and some kindergartners can read whereas others cannot. I found that I could get more feedback from the children if I read to them as a group and have the book talk. As Chambers stated and as I also found in my own work, the observations generated in conversation produced the most profound insights and the most memorable moments. As Chambers states:

Inevitably, as this talk develops, new insights will be added, comments made that are intended to be helpful but prove to be red herrings or blind alleys. Anecdotes—world-to-text—will be told, memories of other books brought into the conversation. (p. 74)

The books created a lot of excitement but some conversations led to the issue of environment, while others did not. *The Iron Giant* certainly changed their perspective about the environment but each and every book they read gave them more awareness about the living things around them. All these books further gave them more to think about how the environment is very important and that they have an important role in preserving it and keeping it clean. I observed many changes in the children after I finished reading the books for my MRP. One day (after I was finished reading the books) one of the children told other children to “stop wasting

the water [at the faucet] because it is not good for the environment.” I was silently watching and it made me so happy that they had learned to take care of natural resources and their environment. Lawrence Buell (1995) wrote, “What is the possibility of a human harmony within nature?” (p. 159); we should have a marriage with, or even better, a loving commitment to nature that is based on love, care, and kindly use of earth. It seemed children were developing a connection with nature.

The empathy, willingness to share information, and sense of community I saw among the children seems remarkable especially after we finished reading the books and had many discussions. I would attribute this to their growing maturity and being aware of self, others, and their environment. Many of these children have been together in the same class for 2 years. They worry about their classmates; if they cannot see a certain friend in the classroom they come running to me and say “Ms. Sajid we cannot see Tom [pseudonym].” Their concern is genuine and very sincere and they are only at peace when they know that their fellow classmate is fine. Their love for fellow humans and animals is very innate and sincere.

According to Buell (1995), if we regard “man as part of nature, as the outcome of same vital forces underfoot and overhead that the plants and animals are” (p. 191), only then can we find inner peace and also respect the world around us. After I finished reading books about the environment, I noticed another example of their empathy. I had booked a presentation for the children from our local Animal Services because they were so intrigued by the animals. Children loved to learn about animals and touch a real rabbit that Animal Services brought to class. Many days after the presentation from Animal Services, children saw a dead bird in the forest and each and every one of them pleaded with me to “call the Animal Services so they could help the bird.” I had to tell them the sad news that Animal Services cannot do anything if the bird is not living

anymore. They were disappointed but in their own innocent ways they always want to participate in the healing of the world around them.

Buell (1995) also writes that while nuclear holocaust is an ever-present threat, genetic mutation, global warming, and pollution threaten us more. The idea of a rabbit that can be turned into a dog or a barcode seems frightening but in the modern world of technology it seems like a possibility (Buell, 1995, p. 284). The ability to be empathetic is there in all of us but I think we lose it as we grow older. However it is very important for children to know the truth and also to know that they have the power and ability to heal the world. The world is changing so quickly that we should inculcate a sense of responsibility about the environment in our future generation. The world should not become a poisoned and polluted place as Rachel Carson (1992) says in *Silent Spring*. To prevent it from happening to our world, we have to educate and inform our children about it. Some harm has already been done due to wars, chemical use of pesticides, and emissions from cars and industrial fumes that have polluted the world. Along with that, nuclear weapons, nuclear power plant accidents, and nuclear waste have caused havoc all over the world. I often think that we humans can be very strong but we are very vulnerable as well.

Buell (1995) writes “Environmental holocaust now seems not only a potential by-product of nuclear attack but also an imminent peril in its own right” (p. 52). Nuclear energy has already caused pollution and will cause more pollution in the future. I liked when Buell used the term “environmental holocaust” because this is exactly what has happened in the world. Humans have become selfish. Air-conditioning technologies and products have polluted the world. Buell warns that “This blindness to the environment produces unintended destabilizing consequences like skin lesions from the ozone hole, owing partly to the products of cooling technologies that have insulated us from confronting the scandal of our environmental dependence” (p. 110). After

reading these lines by Buell, I think before I turn on my air conditioning. I recently went to Disneyland, in Florida. Although it was heavenly to have air conditioning in the hot sweltering August heat of Orlando, Florida, I started to wonder about the effects of air conditioning on the environment. We have to realize that when we hurt the environment we are eventually going to hurt ourselves, both physically and emotionally, and also harm our future generations. All the pollution that is being created in developing countries such as India, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, or in any other part of the world is eventually going to poison the environment on a global scale. As Thoreau once said, “if some are prosecuted for abusing children, others deserve to be prosecuted for maltreating the face of nature committed to their care” (as cited in Buell, 1995, p. 209). Environmental laws are being created and advocacy is being done for the environment but the pace is very slow because many governments, big organizations, and rich influential people all over the world have their hands dipped in the blood of atrocities to the earth.

We have to not only educate the older generation but most importantly we have to educate our younger generation, our children. According to Roland Barthes “To read [to listen to] a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next” (as cited in Chambers, 1996, p.77). It is also my experience that as children read more or listen to stories more, their understanding and comprehension, and ability to read and imagine reach different levels too. The only thing teachers need to do to nurture children’s imagination is time and good books.

Both during and after my research project, I realized several times children started to care more about their environment and animals. They are already at a very sensitive, caring, and empathetic age in kindergarten and it is easy for them to understand the need for care, empathy, and love for other creatures that inhabit the earth. I could see their love for nature, insects,

animals, and humans in their art before I started my MRP, but after reading *Iron Giant* and many other books for my MRP, I noticed that they not only became more close to me but their love for nature became more evident in their conversations, play, and art. Thoreau wrote that “The question is not what you look at—but how you look and whether you see” (as cited in Buell, 1995, p. 115). The storybooks that I read during my MRP taught the children and me more about the bugs, ants, insects, or creature that we are not so attracted to at first glance, such as eels or pigs, and also about the delicate balance nature has created among different creatures.

Personally, I learned a lot from the children and from my MRP. Although I am not completely cured of my fear of some bugs, especially centipedes, I have realized more what Rachel Carson (1962) pointed out in *Silent Spring* that there is a fine balance in nature and it has produced everything for a purpose and nothing in nature from the smallest organism to the largest is extra or unnecessary (p. 33).

The questions for book talk cited by Chambers (1996) on pages 80 to 84 in *Tell Me* are very good questions to ask children. During my research projects most of the time I had to improvise and make the questions easier or simple but I used almost the same questions as my base during the research process. Children had more to say after listening to some books and had few comments after other books, but just like Chambers remarked that adults should respect children’s opinion, I also respected and honoured their opinion. Having other conversation starters such as mentioning other books, references to real life, or anecdotes can enrich the book talk. In other words, the teacher helps make sure that it is, in Wayne Booth’s words, “a kind of conversation that might *get somewhere*—not just a sharing of subjective opinions but a way of learning from one another” (as cited in Chambers, 1996, p. 75). When children sit together on the carpet and listen to what their peers are saying, they are actually learning from each other.

During this research project, children really enjoyed the process of reading with me and it was a very nurturing experience for them. I had always read with the children but reading for my MRP was slightly different because I picked the books for them; usually I let the children choose the books. The whole process was based on the children's interest and I made sure that the children learned about environmental imagination and ecocriticism in a very natural way.

According to Buell (1995), "Nature itself is an oppressed and silent class, in need of spokespersons" (pp. 20-21) and I thought through my MRP, children can be the spokespersons for the nature. Buell also explains that the public awareness and protests against mistreatment of nonhumans and domestic animals has been fairly recent because these protests started at the turn of the 19th-century and were propelled by self-interest of keeping our environment safe (p. 21). After I was finished reading the books, one of the children asked me, "Ms. Sajid when are going to read the books you sent the letter home for?" I said, "We have read the books as a group and now we are finished reading those books." I reminded him of the names of the books and then the child remembered the books we had read as a group. This conversation made me realize that the whole process was very gentle and nurturing yet it was informative for the children.

I asked them very simple questions during my MRP. The strategies explained in *Tell me* by Aidan Chambers were mostly for older children but they helped a lot. I had to keep the questions very simple for my research project but interestingly during circle time children added to each other's comments. Chambers emphasized the importance of not using old-fashioned teacher's interview words such as "why" or "what." I tried to ask questions that were open ended and I found I got better at asking open-ended questions as I progressed in my research project. According to Chambers, the teacher's intention should never be to intimidate the student but to have a conversation. I find children in kindergarten are young and they speak their mind

because they have not yet gone through the conforming process imposed by the school system. Chambers (1996) also says that it is important to be honest and not to unnecessarily prolong the experience of reading the book or questioning so that the whole process remains authentic for the children (pp. 43-46). I tried my best not to prolong the process of reading storybooks or asking questions, but as long as children were interested I wanted them to share their learning or thoughts.

Over the years after working with young children, I have started to realize the beneficial things that insects do for us. In the process of this research project I have learned to respect nature and its little helpers, bugs included, and also about the tensions between habitable space and toxic destruction (L. Paul, personal communication, August 25, 2016). On the last day of school, one of the children gave me a thank-you note saying “Thank you for reading books to us.” She also made a picture of me and her, holding a book, and it made me very happy. In my own way, I tried in the best possible way I could to teach kindergarten children about ecocriticism and environmental imagination. Children are the torch bearers of tomorrow and I hope they carry forward the flame of knowledge they got from me. This whole research project brings an old Farsi (Persian) story to my mind about an old man who was planting walnut plants and somebody asked him “why are you planting these walnuts old man, because by the time these trees bear fruit, you will be dead.” The old man said, patiently, “I am planting these trees not for myself but for my future generations.” I also think we should take care of the environment not only for ourselves but also for the future generations.

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Appendix

List of Books I Read to the Children for My MRP

- Baker, J. (1987). *Where the forest meets the sea*. New York, NY: Tien Wah Press.
- Baker, J. (1992). *Window*. Hong Kong: Random House.
- Carle, E. (1977). *The grouchy ladybug*. Italy: Harper Collins.
- Carle, E. (2011). *The very hungry caterpillar*. Grosset & Dunlap.
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- French, V. (1993). *Caterpillar, catterpillar*. Hong Kong: Colorprint Offset.
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- Hughes, T., & Davidson, A. (1999). *Iron giant*. New York, NY: Random House.
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